

About Form-Based Code

As the name suggests, form-based codes seek to regulate the *form*, of the built environment. To get a mental “picture” of form, imagine a group of buildings located on a city block. Picture how each building is placed on the block. Where is the parking located? Are the building entrances near the sidewalk? Are there several types of buildings on the block that can accommodate different types of uses? Is the front of the building inviting? These are just some of the visual aspects that are emphasized in a form-based code.

This new approach builds on the idea that a community’s physical form is its most enduring characteristic, particularly the appearance and qualities of the public spaces, and the places created by buildings.

In contrast, conventional zoning typically seeks to control land use and density, but is largely silent on matters of form beyond the most basic height, floor-area, and setback limits for individual buildings. This type of zoning code is mostly reliant on explaining the rules in text form only.

Conversely, form-based codes rely heavily on the use of visual examples such as illustrations and photographs with supporting text to explain development regulations. The Department of Planning is studying ways to use these visual aid techniques to enhance and improve the city’s current text-based zoning code for the downtown area, also known as the Downtown Centennial Plan.

What are the benefits of a form-based code?

1. **Pictures tell the story:** Form-based codes are more readily understood by those who are not routinely involved with land use or development related professions and may be unfamiliar with the unique terminology and regulations.
2. **Easy-to-find information:** Form-based codes present all the relevant information in one location of the document.
3. **Great for mixing uses:** Form-based codes support a mix of uses from different categories, especially in town centers, without requiring extra processes and additional hearings.
4. **Streamlined process:** The clarity of its format and intent can lead to a more streamlined approval process, potentially reducing time and cost.

What are the characteristics of a form-based code?

Zoning Districts –Conventional form-based codes are defined around districts, neighborhoods and major transportation corridors. Districts are characterized by their density and degree of urbanization – from rural open space to high-density town centers, and all commonly regulated dimensions and features such as building bulk, street lighting, sidewalks, parking and landscaping, are linked to the different districts.

Uses – Form-based codes encourage bringing destinations or places that people gather in large numbers to work, shop and/or play closer to easily accessed neighborhoods that feature an array of housing which meet the needs of various lifestyles, ages and incomes.

Design – Greater attention is given to streetscapes and the design of public spaces, and the role of individual buildings in shaping these public spaces. Form-based codes recognize how critical these public spaces are in creating and defining a “place.”